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'Return to Islam,' poor economy put Mubarak on spot

By Martin Sieff
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In the months before Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat was assassinated in October 1981, it was common talk in Cairo that the president was overdue for a "heart attack." Today his successor, Hosni Mubarak, may be worrying whether people are predicting a similar fate for him.

Last week's outbreak of fundamentalist Moslem rioting in the city of Aswan, 400 miles south of Cairo, raised old fears for Mr. Mubarak. One of the 60 arrested was Omar Abdel-Rahman, a blind preacher who was tried for complicity in President Anwar Sadat's assassination. Mr. Abdel-Rahman was found innocent of the charges.

Government-controlled media at the time described Mr. Abdel-Rahman as the spiritual leader of an underground fundamentalist group, called Al-Jihad, or Holy War.

Mr. Abdel-Rahman was tried a second time on charges of participating in a conspiracy to overthrow the government, but was again found innocent.

One Egypt affairs analyst described Mr. Abdel-Rahman as "very popular," with "a tremendous revolutionary potential."

"His message of 'return to Islam' is not directly political, but his followers draw political conclusions from it," the source said.

"He certainly knows the revolutionary potential of what he's doing. He's probably close to the groups from which Sadat's assassins came," he said.

Mr. Mubarak already is uneasy about the popular forces at work in Egypt. When 22,000 policemen in the Central Security Force rampaged in a xenophobic orgy of destruction in February, he had to fall back on Defense Minister Abdel Hamid Abu Ghazala's army to put the mutiny down and restore order.

The February riots were much bigger than the food riots that rocked Egypt in 1977 and helped persuade President Sadat to launch his peace initiative toward Israel. They were the most widespread example of unrest since the fall of King Farouk and the monarchy in 1952.

Prior to the February riots there

already had been indications that the president was uneasy about the growing prestige and political clout of the military. Eight months ago he replaced several military men in his cabinet with technocrats.

Then, in January, Suleiman Khater, the Central Security Force policeman who became a popular hero after shooting dead seven Israeli tourists (including two women and four children) at Ras Burka in Sinai last October, was found dead in his prison cell where he was serving a life sentence. President Mubarak refused a public inquiry into the case. In a remarkable interview, he warned Egyptian opposition groups of a "dangerous and frightening future."

"If I have borne much," the president said, "there are others who cannot."

Commented the influential London-based monthly The Middle East: "The opposition got the message. For the first time, an Egyptian president was not only admitting that there were forces within the system which might be outside his control, but was using these forces as a threat to silence the opposition. The unmentioned bogeyman was taken by many to be Defense Minister Abu Ghazala."

Marshal Abu Ghazala, undoubtedly the No. 2 man in Egypt, recently turned down Mr. Mubarak's offer of the vice presidency because he would then have to give up his power base, the defense ministry.

The Central Security Forces mutiny confirmed the wisdom of this move. As recently as the Khater suicide in January, most observers of the Egyptian scene ruled out a military coup as a serious possibility. But now, as one Washington analyst noted, "In a situation of increasing loss of control, the army is crucial."

One leading British Arabist pointed out that short of an assassination like the October 1981 murder of President Sadat, the only ways for the regime to fall are by military coup, or by crowd action in the streets, with a Khomeini-like religious-charismatic figure pushing things on.

Keeping such crowds under con-

trol is primarily a policing problem, the Arabist said.

"Nasser was very good at it," he added. However: "Someone can lose his nerve — as the Shah did — and then the whole thing becomes a shambles."

He noted that the February mutiny occurred within the police — precisely the body needed to contain any public unrest.

And while Defense Minister Abu Ghazala is an obvious candidate to lead a military coup, Mr. Abdel-Rahman could focus popular dissatisfaction on the streets.

Observers regard these fundamentalists, of whom Mr. Abdel-Rahman is probably the most popular spokesman, as a greater danger to the regime than Col. Qaddafi in Libya.

They note that Egyptian intelligence has a proven record of success in infiltrating and foiling Libyan espionage and terror organizations on Egyptian soil. The Libyans also have had to rely on their own people infiltrating into Egyptian society. The Libyans have been unable to attract the support of indigenous groups within Egypt.

The malaise affecting President Mubarak's regime goes deeper, however, than fundamentalist rhetoric or economic recession. As one Washington expert noted: "Nothing he's tried has come off. It's all been a failure."

He instanced the slowness of

Egypt's reintegration into the Arab world, the strain affecting the relationship with Israel, the failure of the Egyptian commando rescue bid on the hijacked airliner at Malta last November when 60 people died, the embarrassment Egypt suffered with both the United States and the Arab nations over the Achille Lauro hijack affair last October, and the April 1985 coup in Sudan that toppled Egypt's close ally President Gaafar Nimieri and installed a pro-Qaddafi regime that has signed a defense pact with Libya.

Egyptian regimes, the analyst pointed out, need to play major roles on the world's stage, with grand gestures, in order to attract popular support, particularly if their economic policies at home are failing.

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President Mubarak, after 4½ years of power, has yet to leave a mark comparable to that of his predecessors, Gamal Nasser or Anwar Sadat. His acceptance of Mr. Sadat's peace policy with Israel enrages Egypt's Sunni Moslem fundamentalists, who look to Iran's Ayatollah Khoimeini, Shi'ite though he is, for inspiration.

Mr. Mubarak served as a loyal and self-effacing No. 2 for many years to President Sadat. It was widely expected when he took over that he would reveal qualities of toughness and decision, just as Mr. Sadat himself had when he came out from under the shadow of Gamal Nasser.

But he has failed to attract the enthusiasm, or the imagination, of the Egyptian people. Meanwhile the economy goes from bad to worse and Egypt increasingly flounders in its foreign policy.

Today, the portraits of Gamal Nasser are reported to be widespread on the streets of Cairo. This is bad news for Mr. Mubarak. They were also thick on the ground back in 1981, when Mr. Sadat's time was running out.